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ABSTRACT

For homeless children, assuming responsibility for their own survival is an act of self-empowerment. However, society tends to see these children as victims to be rescued, delinquents who need to be disciplined, or else they are ignored. These views deny the resourcefulness of children who survive under these conditions. A study was conducted of homeless children of Bogota, Colombia with the goal of mutual empowerment of both the researchers and the children instead of disempowerment of the children. Tyler's psychosocial competence configuration was used as a framework for developing a structured interview to measure children's sense of self-efficacy, trust, and active planfulness in their different life contexts of homes, institutions, and streets. The interview was administered by street workers over a period of 2 years to 144 children (129 boys and 15 girls), 101 of whom were under 18. Results of the study included the following: (1) reasons for leaving home included abuse, excessive discipline, family problems, parental death, poverty, and search for adventure; (2) institutions were appreciated for their ability to meet basic needs but disliked for discipline, violence, and abuse; (3) children survived by stealing, begging, and joining groups; and (4) children primarily wished for work and money to help others and for a home. Implications of this research include social policy changes to prevent family abuse and the need for agencies to support street children, capitalizing on their strengths. (ABL)

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A Preventive Psychosocial Approach for Working with Street Children

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For the millions of homeless children in the developed and developing world, assuming responsibility for their own survival by choice or by circumstance is an act of self-empowerment. Unfortunately, organized society seems to have no desire to see the self-empowerment of these children as constructive and as evidence of resourcefulness. Neither does society make any provisions for seeing their behavior as individually healthy and sustaining it, supporting it, and directing it into prosocial channels.

Instead, society and its empowered caretakers characteristically view such children in one of three ways. They are seen as victims of an unfortunate fate who are to be rescued and returned to parental control or provided substitute parental control. They are seen as delinquents who need to be disciplined and controlled because they refuse to be "responsible"; that is, they refuse to live and die under the conditions, no matter how harsh, that the adult world has assigned to them. Or, their existence is ignored or denied. For example, the President's Commission on the Homeless has not included children on its agenda.

These alternatives deny the resourcefulness of children who survive under extremely harsh conditions. They reject the validity of the children's self-empowerment assertion that society's

arrangements for managing their lives and futures have failed them. These children feel that they can no longer trust themselves in society's hands. They have undertaken to manage their lives and futures on their own, retain control of their lives, and entrust themselves and their fate to others only on a voluntary basis.

On the streets these children are vulnerable to exploitation. On the other hand they can also work out a life for themselves. They can negotiate arrangements with others and provide services in return for monetary or other survival necessities.

Background

Street children are not a new phenomenon nor are they found only in third world countries. Victor Hugo first used the term "gamin" to describe the children of Paris who lived on the streets during the French Revolution. In the mid 1800's Dickens wrote Oliver Twist (1921). Kipling's Kim (1901) is a beautiful and powerfully detailed story of a street urchin in northern India. Ashby (1984) has provided an overview of the work of reformers in the USA from 1890 to 1917. In 1970 Cole reported case studies to depict his work with New York city adolescents living on their own during the 1960's. The January 6, 1986 issue of Newsweek reported on the rising numbers of homeless in the U. S. and recent World Health Organization estimates are of 60 million homeless children throughout the world.

There have been attempts to describe and understand street children. A number of investigators (Kapadia and Pillai (1971), Gutierrez, et al. (1978), Munoz (1980)), Miller, et al (1980),

Felsman (1982), Connolly (1983) and others) tell us that street children are found in every major city in the world. Like Oliver Twist and Kim, these children have a characteristic appearance. Their clothing fits poorly with tears and patches, their hair is uncombed, often their hands and faces are dirty, and they seem to have a devil-may-care attitude toward the world. They live by their wits telling incredible stories to enhance their begging, speak a street lexicon which perhaps serves to give them an identity as a special group, and are fiercely independent. They are reluctant to trust adults although they often honor a strong loyalty code to one another, particularly if they have elected to join a group or band of other street children.

There are differences between street children in developed and underdeveloped countries. One difference is that there is no counter-culture attraction to the streets in the Third World. Children there know that life on the streets is neither romantic nor a vehicle of social protest. Another difference is that studies in India and in Latin America report that the great majority of the children on the streets are boys while Miller et al (1980) report that 56% of their U. S. sample of runaways is girls. Further, they conducted a national survey which led to a description of the typical U. S. runaway as a white female, 13 to 15 years old, from a middle income home, away for a short time, not in legal trouble, but unable to cope with family problems. Brennan et al (1978), in another U. S. based study, obtained data on a relatively large sample of 250 girls as well as an equal number of boys.

Both of these U. S. based studies concluded that regardless

of the children's reported reasons for leaving home, most of them left very chaotic family situations which often involved abuse, alcoholism, and alienation. Further, the children viewed society's agencies as not particularly helpful to them. Miller and her colleagues made the point that runaways are illegal aliens in their own land. Both studies attempted to formulate frameworks for understanding the children and their dynamics. Neither challenged the conventional view that the solution to such children's futures rests on establishing effective patterns of adult controlled and monitored socialization. Brennan and his colleagues did report on a few counter-cultural agencies which attracted runaways. They also noted that those agencies had considerable difficulty with police authorities because they would not open their records to the police.

Gamines study

It is with that context in mind that our involvement with street children in Bogota, Colombia, can most appropriately be viewed. In the past Bogota has been considered by some to be the "world capital" of homeless children and it does have its share. Yet in many ways it is not unlike any other large city. Its disparities between the rich and the poor are more marked than in what we call "developed" countries but there are homeless children everywhere, even in Washington, D. C. The picture from Bogota that we have tried to describe is probably generalizable to the USA and other countries.

What is most important is not our particular findings but the rootedness of our approach in a conception of resource

collaboration across disciplines, cultures, and participants in this joint enterprise. Our approach involves all of us empowering each other. It also involves all of us in caring about each other and seeking mutually facilitative outcomes. When working with children those factors become particularly important. They keep us from disempowering (disabling) the children whose self-empowerment we are seeking to support. In short, when we assume that we know what is best for these children and how they should see the world we have disempowered them as much as the people who drove them to the streets in the first place.

The setting

All of our generalizations stem from involvements with particular people in particular settings. To understand them we need to have some sense of those people and settings. Bogota is a modern city, and as with other modern cities, it has slums and victims. In one way its victims are fortunate. The climate there is mild. In other ways their life is grim and barren; a fact that's true for street children everywhere.

Approach

Over the last four years we have conducted a preliminary study (Tyler, Tyler, Echeverry, & Zea, in press) and a cross-validation study of homeless children in Bogota. Our work began in 1982 with Sandy Tyler's participation as a volunteer nurse with an association of volunteer "street workers" providing medical assistance to children on the streets of Bogota. In a short time and at the request of those street workers we began collaborating with them to design a structured interview approach which

they could use to enable street children to provide their personal perspectives on their lives. We have just returned those findings to street workers and other caretakers in Bogota in the form of a practical training manual that they can use to teach each other about how to help the children improve their lives.

Concept

Our initial street worker collaborators shared with the street children a sense of resentment about the condescension of professionals, the hostility of adults generally, and the exploitation and abuse to which the children were constantly exposed. They wanted us to help provide a more balanced picture by including the children's perspective. We worked with them to develop a structured interview for eliciting the children's perceptions of their home, institution, and street environments; their ways of surviving; their wishes and goals; their backgrounds; and a picture of how they think about themselves and go about organizing their lives.

Tables 1 and 2 of Psychosocial Competence & Environmental Scales

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We used Tyler's psychosocial competence configuration as a framework and developed Likert scales to measure their senses of self-efficacy, trust, and active planfulness in their different life contexts--homes, institutions, streets. We also built Likert scales to measure the children's senses of psychological and physical supports and threats in those same contexts. Finally, we focused on their exposure to and involvement in

"adult" activities such as smoking, drinking, drugs, and sex.

Methods

We had those questionnaires translated and took them to Bogota. There we worked with the street workers - some of whom are former street children - to put the questions into street language rather than Castilian Spanish. We trained them to do the interviews and they took on the task. In 1984 they gathered data on 75 street children; in 1985 on 69. Most of them (129) were boys; but a few (15) were girls. We used their reported ages and place of residence as a criterion for including them in our analyses. We found that 101 of them (94 boys and 7 girls) were under 18 and defined the streets as their home.

RESULTS

Findings from the cross-validation study and across the different groups are consistent with our earlier results. Consequently we are presenting findings from the two studies combined as they were so similar. In addition, we are presenting data on those 94 boys who range in age from 5 to 17 and live on the streets. Let me summarize briefly the relevant major patterns:

1. On the average the boys were 13 years old and had 2 years of education. Most of them were first or second born children. Two-thirds of them reported that they liked the family, comforts, school, etc. of home and four of ten reported that someone has loved them. Two-thirds of their mothers were living and slightly more that half of them were at home. Slightly over two-fifths of the fathers were living and about one-fifth of them were at home. On the average they had two brothers and two sisters.

2 The children have been exposed to harshness and exploita-

tion early in life. Three of ten say no one has ever loved them or they don't know whether anyone has. They reported that at home they liked least the abuse, excessive discipline, and family problems. Two-thirds reported leaving home for those reasons and because of parental death or poverty. On the average they left home at age eight. Only one-fourth of them left home because of boredom or a search for adventure.

One-fourth of them reported having been sexually abused by the time they were twelve. One-fourth had been shot or stabbed. Their health problems ranged from colds to skin & eye infections and from lice to venereal disease.

3. Thirty-two of them were interviewed in a detention institution or jail. Of those who reported that they were or had previously lived in institutions, about two-thirds were there under coercion, the others went by choice for work, education, or some other prosocial purpose. Constructive possibilities at institutions were mentioned more than complaints by a ratio of more than four to one. They liked best having their basic needs met, being protected, and getting a chance to work and study. They liked least the excessive discipline, violence, and abuse. Twenty-eight of them reported leaving institutions because of bad treatment or unfilled promises. Only six had been expelled for fighting.

4. The children sometimes survive by antisocial means, in fact one-third acknowledged that they live by stealing. Yet they were also prosocial, productive, and caring. One-fourth of them said they survived by working, begging, and performing in public.

They band together in groups called "galladas" with an agreed upon "home" such as a vacant lot or under a traffic bridge. That home is called a camada. They join galladas primarily to seek help, be with friends or sibs, and because of mutual respect between them and their peers. Two thirds reported that they have loved someone. Four of ten reported that they are responsible for someone else and three of ten reported that someone else is responsible for them.

5. The ways that they spend their time revealed that they were children caught up in an adult world. One half of them said that they play games and go to movies; one third said they go to parks and talk to friends. On the other hand, one fifth of them reported that they are part of sexually active groups, one half of them smoke, one fourth drink, four of ten use drugs.

6. When they were asked to state three wishes if they could have anything they wanted, they wished primarily for work and money to be used for helping others - and for a home. Sadly, a few of them said that they don't believe in dreams and refused to wish.

Our questionnaire also included Likert scales to measure their perceptions of their psychosocial competence and their environments. Forty-four of the boys responded to those more complete questionnaires.

Tables 3 and 4 on mean score patterns

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1. They rated their homes and institutions as more protective and more trustworthy than the streets, but they also rated them as less psychosocially supportive.

2. They saw the streets as being a dangerous environment. However, they have a stronger sense there of being able to cope actively with and control their lives.

3 Their senses of self-efficacy and of active coping are related to the presence of supports in their environments, but not to threats.

4. At home their feelings of trust are related primarily to the presence of psychological supports and secondarily to the presence of psychological threats.

5 In institutions their senses of trust are related primarily to the absence of physical threats and secondarily to the presence of physical supports.

6. Their senses of self-efficacy are more situational than their senses of trust which are more situational than their levels of active coping.

IMPLICATIONS

It is our conviction that these findings have implications for how we can be of more effective direct help to street children and for how we can develop programs which will be of more help to them. These findings provide a basis for formulating a tri-level prevention perspective for ameliorating the problems of street children and improving their lives. A few of the implications of those prevention perspectives are spelled out in the following paragraphs.

In terms of <u>primary prevention</u>, the stark poverty and social conditions which mark the lives of these children and their families require substantial social policy changes if their life

possibilities are to be significantly improved. Social changes of that magnitude require first the establishing of a need for such change by demonstrating the destructive impact of conditions such as those which characterize the lives of these children. They can also be facilitated by demonstrating in more limited contexts the prosocial value of changes such as strengthening family units and providing resources and prosocial options for the children. This research project, our published reports of its findings, and our dissememination of the training manual developed on the basis of our findings are steps in that direction.

For example, it seems legitimate on the basis of our findings to question Hartup's summary statement in his 1983 chapter on Peer Relations in Vol. 4 of the Handbook of Child Psychology in which he states that

> Secure family relations are the basis for entry into the peer system and success within it. Family breakdown tends to interfere with adaptation to the peer culture, and good family relations are needed throughout childhood and adolescence as the basis for peer relations....Most adolescents remain attuned to parental norms even though much time is spent with other children. Dissonance may be considerable when adolescents are alienated from their parents and associate with agemates who endorse misconduct, but the majority of adolescents are able to synthesize their understandings and expectations of their families and their peers. (p. 172)

We would differ with Hartup's summary on several counts:

First, children can and do develop sound and prosocial peer

relations even in the context of adult abuse and abandonment.

Second, children can and do develop a sense of and a commitment to commendable societal norms even without parents or with parents who don't or can't support those norms.

Third, it is noteworthy that Hartup's bibliography does not include studies on runaways or homeless children. It is not appropriate to use data from either organized or disorganized families to draw inferences about the capabilities of children who are faced with the task of survival and self-socialization outside of a family context.

At the secondary prevention level, instead of devaluing their capabilities, institutions and homes can build on the children's strengths and be responsive to their input and ideas when planning, implementing, and evaluating programs. Social services can recognize the coping capabilities of intact families and work to support and strengthen them so that their integrity can be maintained. In the absence of intact families, social service agencies can work to strengthen the relationships between street children and their primary caretakers, even if those caretakers are peers. We would emphasize that in working working directly with street children we need to base our approach on a conception of prosocial empowerment of children which:

a. Is based on children's strengths. These children demonstrate amazing hardiness and resourcefulness. They survive under exceedingly difficult circumstances and a substantial portion of them develop or retain in doing so a commendable prosocial orien-

tation to society and to each other.

b. Does not equate prosocial behavior with conformity to adult control and expectations.

As was noted in the previous section on primary prevention, children can and do develop individual strengths and prosocial commitments in the absence of parental sanctions. In fact at times they find it important to take leave of their parents to do do. Further, There is substantial indication that street children can and do form supportive peer relationships. Programs that build on those capabilities will take a significant step forward in strengthening the self-empowerment of these children. Such programs will also take a significant step toward channeling that self-empowerment in prosocial directions.

c. Does deal with street children's sophistication and trauma. These children have been exposed all too often to many unattractive aspects of life. Efforts to be of constructive assistance to them seem limited at best, and doomed to failure at worst, unless they incorporate a sensitivity to those experiences. Blaming the children for their own victimization and rejecting their attempts to explore and understand those experiences place a heavy burden on them. It also invites the conclusion that we helpers are of no real help to them. Further, denial of the impact of those experiences plus an unblinking pretense that the children are still innocent or, even worse, can return to an innocent state, can only lead to loss of our credibility.

d. Does acknowledge that their role and skills are valued by at least some segments of society. These children work at a

variety of menial tasks providing socially approved services such as cleaning debris from steets and parks. They also steal or serve as prostitutes. We may be distressed that children are involved in those activities; nevertheless, they are trying to survive and adults are exploiting their skills or other attributes and profiting from that exploitation.

At the tertiary prevention level, when the individual child enters the system, his/her sophistication experience and coping style when dealing with harsh realities can be recognized and accommodated. Programs can be designed to capitalize on the strengths and capacity for self-empowerment which the children have developed. The imposition of institutional values are counterproductive to the extent that they devalue children, lead children to devalue themselves, and make them dependent.

Even the very limited data that we have gathered demonstrate that these children have individual and peer-oriented prosocial strengths as well as antisocial ones. Most of them are first and second born children who have taken their lives into their own hands. They show considerable evidence of wanting a meaningful, caring life in which they contribute and in which they too are loved. Society is already exploiting their work and using their services. Utilizing their capabilities and prosocial desires through programs which build on those strengths can only heighten their potential contribution to the quality of their own lives and to their society. It can also reduce their vulnerability to exploitation by the adult world.

As a final point it is important to underscore that in

general many of these children are making at least some contribution to their society even under very adverse circumstances. Through such supportive measures as those summarized above their potential contributions to society can be much more fully realized. Society has much to gain from that possibility and it seems to be one to which community and other psychologists can make important contributions.

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TABLE 1

GAMINS OF BOGOTA

PSYCHOSOCIAL COMPETENCE SCALES

SELF-EFFICACY

- SELF-RESPECT
- CONTROL OF LIFE
- HAPPINESS
- SELF-HONESTY
- SELF-TRUST

SELF-WORLD

- SENSE OF BELONGING
- COOPERATION
- RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY
- CONCERN FOR OTHERS
- SHARING

BEHAVIORAL ATTRIBUTES

- RESOURCEFULNESS
- PLANNING
- INDEPENDENCE
- WORK
- LEADERSHIP

TABLE 2

GAMINS OF BOGOTA

ENVIRONMENTAL SCALES

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORTS

- AFFECTION
- ASSISTANCE
- PROTECTION
- FELLOWSHIP
- RESPECT
- TRUST (FRIENDS)

PHYSICAL SUPPORTS

- CLOTHING
- FOOD
- SHELTER
- HEALTH CARE
- HYGIENE FACILITIES

PSYCHOSOCIAL THREATS

- DANGER FROM PEOPLE
- DANGER FROM AUTHORITIES
- REVENGE FROM VICTIMS

PHYSICAL THREATS

- CHANCE OF ACCIDENTS
- DANGER FROM INFECTIONS & DISEASES

ADULT ACTIVITIES

- AVAILABILITY OF ALCOHOL & DRUGS
- ABUSE OF ALCOHOL & DRUGS
- SEXUAL ACTIVITY

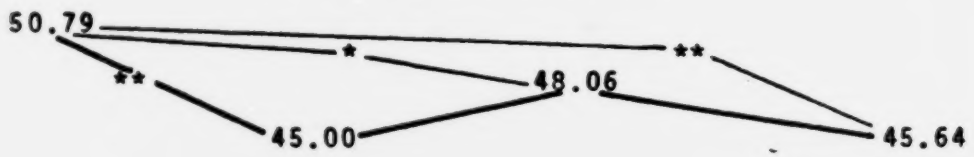
TABLE 3

GAMINS OF BOGOTA (n=44)

PSYCHOSOCIAL COMPETENCE SCALE MEAN COMPARISONS ACROSS SITUATIONS

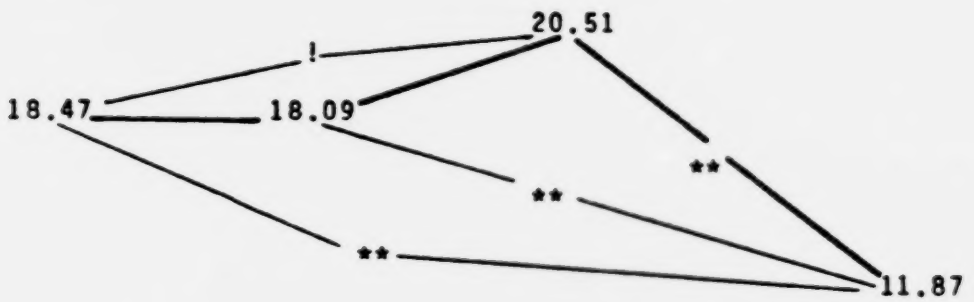
GENERAL	HOME	INSTITUTION	STREET

PSYCHOSOCIAL COMPETENCE

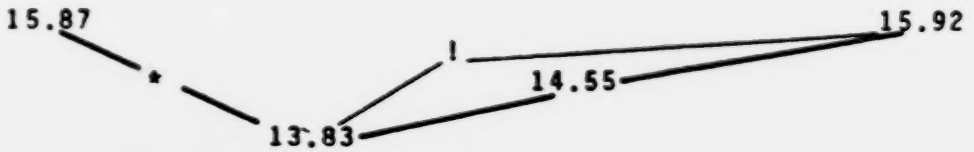


SELF-EFFICACY

SELF-WORLD



BEHAVIORAL ATTRIBUTES



Significance of Differences: ! $p > .05$; * $p > .01$; ** $p > .001$

TABLE 4

GAMINS OF BOGOTA (n = 44)

PSYCHOSOCIAL COMPETENCE SUBSCALE COMPARISONS WITHIN SITUATIONS

SELF-EFFICACY	SELF-WORLD	BEHAVIORAL ATTRIBUTES
GENERAL		
16.55	18.82	15.87
	*	*
HOME		
14.82	18.09	13.83
	**	**
INSTITUTION		
16.13	20.51	14.55
	**	**
		!
STREET		
15.26	11.87	15.92
	**	**

Significance of Differences: ! $p > .05$; * $p > .01$; ** $p > .001$